The Resonator — Dec. 2004

REVIEW

A RAGTIME EPISODE
Clarke Buehling and the Skirtlifters

This CD by Clarke Buehling and the Skirtlifters features five-string banjo. If readers are wondering what a review on that instrument is doing in a four-string banjo publication, stay tuned. This is not the type of five-string banjo playing that we associate today with bluegrass music. This is the kind of banjo playing that was popular just before the advent of the four-string plectrum and tenor banjos. As such it is relevant in a historical context.

The recording is an excellent example of finger-style banjo that was popular from the 1880s into the World War I years. At that time jazz burst upon the popular music scene, and the associated four-string banjo generally replaced the five-string as the banjo of choice. The classic finger-style banjo was played with bare fingers on gut strings as contrasted to the tenor and plectrum banjos played with flat picks on metal strings.

The finger-style banjoist on this CD is Clarke Buehling. He is a longtime member of the American Banjo Fraternity, the oldest banjo organization in the United States, which preserves and perpetuates this historic banjo style. Buehling is very knowledgeable about this almost forgotten style of banjo playing and shows it in his authentic performance and choice of material.

The 18 selections on the CD are all from what is considered the ragtime era and include cakewalks, rags. galops and slow drags. The title tune, "A Ragtime Episode," is by Paul Eno, an important composer for banjo. Other prominent banjo composers represented are George L. Lansing, Joe Morley and A. J. Weidt. Also included on the CD are compositions by Scott Joplin, Tom Turpin, Abe Holzmann, Ford Dabney and other composers of the period.

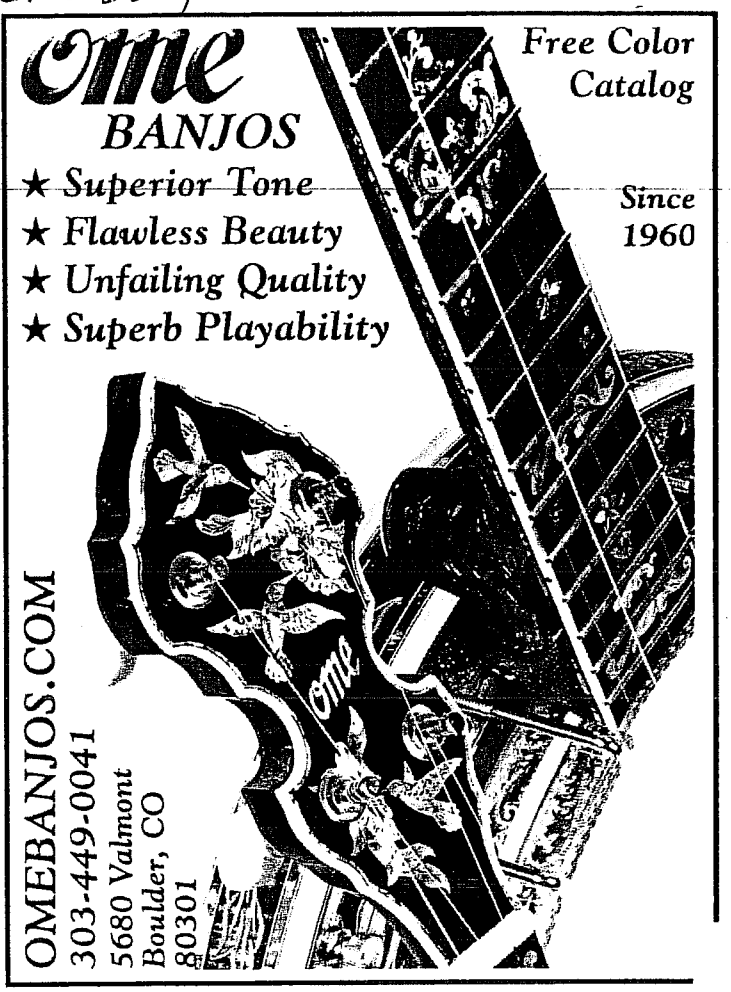
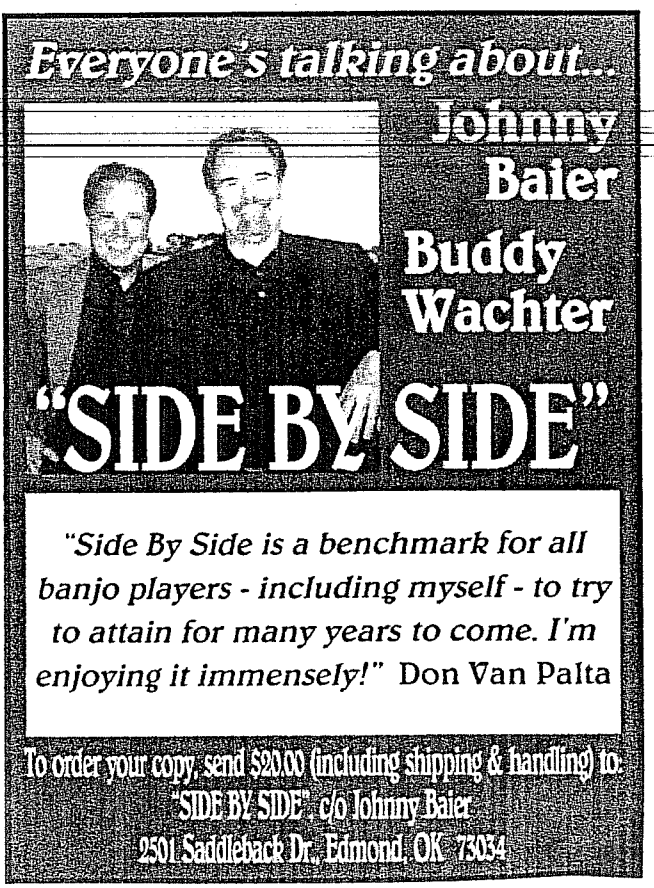
Buehling has adapted this material for his Skirtlifters string band, which includes violin, guitar, and tambourine, as well as banjo. He also plays other voices of the banjo orchestra, piccolo banjo and cello banjo, in addition to regular banjo. Although the instrumentation of this Arkansas-based group suggests a country music sound, this music in its heyday was actually played largely by formally attired banjoists in the parlors and concert halls of urban areas.

Four-string banjoists interested in what came before their instrument's time in banjo history could not do better than listen to this CD.

— Lowell Schreyer

***

"A RAGTIME EPISODE" is available on CD for $15 + $2 for p/h from Clarke Buehling, P.O. Box 744, Fayetteville, AR 72702. Or go online and order from: www.elderly.com, or from: www.CDBaby.com. You can hear samples of this CD here and on Clarke's website: www.theskirtlifters.com.

* * *

sheetmusicplus.com